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XXVII.—*Native Australian Traditions*.

By R. H. MAJOR, Esq.

MY DEAR SIR,—Although the subject announced for this evening as emanating from me is described as “Native Australian Traditions”, I think it right that I should, at the opening of this letter, repeat what I have already stated to you, that I am not prepared myself to communicate any information on those traditions, but am anxious to learn whether any member of the Society, who has visited or resided in Australia, is aware of the existence of such traditions in connection with the early discovery of the country. But, in order that I may show you that I have a cause as well as a motive for propounding such a question, I will take leave to relate to you how the possibility, for I regard it as no more, of such a tradition existing, was suggested to my mind.

It happened some three months ago that I had the good fortune to light upon a MS. mappemonde in the British Museum, in which, on the north-west corner of a country which, apart from its position, bore other unquestionable evidence of being Australia, was written the following legend in Portuguese: “Nuca antara” (doubtless a local geographical name, for the translation of which by any member of the Society I shall be grateful), “Nuca antara was discovered in the year 1601 by Manoel Godinho de Eredia, by command of the Viceroy Ayres de Saldanha.” This carried the date of the first authenticated discovery of Australia five years farther back than the earliest discovery previously recognized in history, and transferred the honour of that discovery beyond all question from Holland to Portugal. I had subsequently the honour of preparing and reading before the Society of Antiquaries a paper containing the announcement of this discovery, and describing the position which it took in the history of supposed and authenticated discoveries of Australia. I say supposed, as well as authenticated discoveries, because I think there can be no doubt that that important country had really been discovered some sixty or seventy years earlier, while surmises had been advanced of its having been discovered even four hundred years before. It is to this latter point that I shall have presently to ask your attention.

Upon my mentioning to my friend Captain Burton the new find that I had made, he informed me, to my surprise, that in Australia the honour of the first authenticated discovery was attributed to the Spaniards, and referred me to a small work, entitled *The Gold Colonies of Australia*, by G. Butler Earp,

which, he assured me, had a very large circulation in that country. On examining the book, I found that near the beginning it contained an account of the early voyages to that country sufficiently full and detailed, and given, whether right or wrong, with so much positiveness of assertion as to be highly calculated to impose on the credulity of an uncritical reader.

Now, sir, I should think myself very unworthily occupied, were I to presume to trouble you or the Ethnological Society with a mere criticism on a compilation of the kind, however large its circulation and fallacious its statements, were it not that one of those statements involved a possibility which, if correct, would be of the highest interest, and that I think that no possibility of gaining information should be allowed to pass by without investigation. I shall, therefore, briefly state that the claim so positively asserted on behalf of the Spaniards was based on the unconscious passage of Torres through the strait, which in consequence received its name from him at the hands of Alexander Dalrymple, at the close of the last century. Now, not only was the passage of Torres through the strait made by him unconsciously, but it was not, in fact, the earliest authenticated sighting of the coast of Australia, inasmuch as it took place in August 1606, whereas the Dutch yacht the *Duyfhen* passed from New Guinea southward along the islands on the west side of Torres Strait, a little to the west and south of Cape York, about the month of March in the same year. This latter, therefore, was the earliest authenticated discovery recorded in history until it was supplanted by that which I have already described as made by the Portuguese in 1601, as I had the good fortune to find about three months since.

But I now come to the assertion, made with equal positiveness and assurance, of the yet earlier discovery by the Chinese, four hundred years before. It is expressed in the following terms: "Previous to De Gama's discovery of the Cape route, a chart was in existence which had been drawn up by Marco Polo, and in this was indicated the position of a 'Great South Land,' of the existence of which he had been informed during his sojourn among the Chinese, to whom, no doubt, belongs the honour of the first discovery of Australia, there being not only tradition to this effect amongst the aborigines, but circumstantial evidence of the most conclusive kind. One instance of this occurred during the past year (1851), viz., the finding of Chinese oars and other nautical implements at a considerable depth beneath the surface of the ground; thus fully confirming the native traditions, as also the long period which must have elapsed since their visit, from the accumulation of alluvial deposit over the evidences themselves. The natives state that their Chinese visitors were murdered."

Now it is, perhaps, a bold thing to hazard a negative assertion ; but, I think, I may be courageous enough to ask any of the Fellows of the Ethnological Society if they ever heard of a chart made by Marco Polo, and that without much fear of being answered in the affirmative. I shall only be too happy to learn that such a chart exists, at the expense of betraying my ignorance. It is true that Ramusio supposed that the famous map of Fra Mauro, at Venice, was copied from an original brought by Marco Polo from Kataia ; but this has been distinctly confuted by Cardinal Zurla. Dr. Vincent also speaks of a map in the Doge's Palace at Venice, drawn up for the elucidation of Marco Polo's travels, but says that from internal evidence it was later than 1550 ; and Marsden, who examined it, was satisfied that it had no pretensions to be considered as the work of Marco Polo. Indeed Dr. Vincent particularly expressed his regret that we have no genuine map that can be traced to Marco Polo. This, however, I can say, that from the written narrative of Marco Polo, maps were framed by the Dutch at the close of the sixteenth century, which, by the adoption of a whole constellation of ludicrous blunders, which it would be tedious to attempt to detail, did, as if by a miracle, pourtray the real country of Australia in its legitimate position, but as part of an immense southern continent pervading the entire south of the globe. It is just possible, but I have not been able to bridge over the chasm so as to verify the fact, that the makers of these maps had cognizance of that veritable discovery which had been made, as I believe, by the Portuguese at the commencement of that century, as shown by some most curious French MS. maps of that period. It is certain that there is no specific indication of such assistance to their information indicated in the Dutch maps to which I have alluded. The passage in Marco Polo is as follows :

“ Upon leaving the island of Java, and steering a course between south and south-west seven hundred miles, you fall in with two islands, the larger of which is named Sondur, and the other Kondur. Both being uninhabited, it is unnecessary to say more respecting them. Having run the distance of fifty miles from these islands, in a south-easterly direction, you reach an extensive and rich province, that forms a part of the main land, and is named Lochac. Its inhabitants are idolaters. They have a language peculiar to themselves, and are governed by their own king, who pays no tribute to any other ; the situation of the country being such as to protect it from any hostile attack. Were it assailable, the Grand Khan would not have delayed to bring it under his dominion. In this country sappan, or brazil wood, is produced in large quantities. Gold

is abundant to a degree scarcely credible ; elephants are found there, and the objects of the chase, either with dogs or birds, are in plenty. From hence are exported all those porcelain shells, which, being carried to other countries, are there circulated for money, as has been already noticed. Here they cultivate a species of fruit called berchi, in size about that of a lemon, and having a delicious flavour. Besides these circumstances there is nothing further that requires mention, unless it be that the country is wild and mountainous, and is little frequented by strangers, whose visits the king discourages, in order that his treasures and other secret matters of his realm may be as little known to the rest of the world as possible.

“Departing from Lochac, and keeping a southerly course for five hundred miles, you reach an island named Pentam, the coast of which is wild and uncultivated ; but the woods abound with sweet scented trees. Between the province of Lochac and this island of Pentam, the sea, for the space of sixty miles, is not more than four fathoms in depth, which obliges those who navigate it to lift the rudders of their ships, in order that they may not touch the bottom. After sailing these sixty miles in a south-easterly direction, and then proceeding thirty miles further, you arrive at an island, in itself a kingdom, named Malaiur, which is likewise the name of its city. The people are governed by a king, and have their own peculiar language. The town is large and well built. A considerable trade is there carried on in spices and drugs, with which the place abounds. Nothing else that requires notice presents itself.”

The description here given of the products of the country referred to is sufficient to show that they will not apply to Australia. There can be little doubt that the error has arisen, as I have said, from a series of blunders. Lochac is shown, from the judicious notes of Marsden, to have been, in all probability, intended for some part of the country of Cambodia, the capital of which was named Loech, according to the authority of Gaspar de Cruz, who visited it during the reign of Sebastian, King of Portugal (see Purchas, vol. iii, p. 169). To meet this conclusion, an error must be supposed in the direction of the course from Java, suggested by Marco Polo ; meanwhile the country of Cambodia produces the gold, the spices, and the elephants, which are attributed to Lochac, the latter of which articles Australia does not produce. Pentam is reasonably supposed by Marsden, to be Bintam, and the island and kingdom of Malaiur (Maletur in the Basle edition of 1532, included in the *Novus Orbis* of Grynæus) to be the kingdom of the Malays. So much for the abstract assertion that Australia was discovered by the Chinese, as derived from the narrative

of Marco Polo. I now come to the points more immediately touching upon the inquiry before us this evening. It is stated by Mr. Earp, that there is a tradition to confirm the assertion as taken from the Venetian traveller, and that that tradition is again confirmed by the fact that Chinese oars and other nautical implements were found in 1851, at a considerable depth beneath the surface of the ground.

Now I would here beg to state, that in the year 1857, Sir C. Nicholson informed me of the fact, that about the year 1851, as well as I can recollect, some keys were discovered in South Australia, underlying some twelve or thirteen feet of alluvial soil and on the surface of the chalk, suggesting the idea, from the probable length of time required for the accumulation of the alluvium, that these keys had been dropped by some very early discoverers, probably by the Portuguese. He also informed me that the keys shortly after their discovery had been shown to Mr. Latrobe, the Governor of Victoria. I was at that time engaged in preparing, for the Hakluyt Society, a work on *Early Voyages to Australia*, which I purposely kept open for six or seven years, in order to allow myself the fullest chance of embodying in my introduction, all the information I could possibly gather respecting the earliest discoveries. I naturally expressed a wish to know what the keys were like, in order to identify the period; but on this point Sir Charles was unable to enlighten me. Before the completion of my work, I had the satisfaction of a visit from Mr. Latrobe, to whom I recalled the circumstance. The whole romance of the incident, however, was entirely dispelled by his assuring me that he attached no importance whatever to the occurrence, as not only the keys had no antique appearance about them, but the accumulation of the alluvium was so rapid in the district where they were found, that he could not honestly pretend to attribute any antiquity whatever to the period when they might happen to have been dropped. Upon this evidence I did not think it worth while to mention the circumstance in the introduction to my book.

With this statement of the facts which have fallen under my cognizance, I venture to put the question to the members of the Ethnological Society, whether they can help me to any information as to the existence of aboriginal traditions respecting the early discovery of the country; and further, incidentally, to inquire whether any translation can be given to the topographical designation of "Nuca Antara."

I remain, dear Sir, yours very truly,
R. H. MAJOR.

To James Hunt, Esq., Ph.D., F.S.A.,
Hon. Secretary of the Ethnological Society of London.

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